THE PORT OF MISSING MEN

By MEREDITH NICHOLSON,

Author of "The House of a Thousand Candles"

Chapter VI

TOWARD THE WESTERN STARS.

GENEVA is a good point from which to plan flight to any part of the world, for there at the top of Europe the whole continental railway system is easily within your grasp, and you may make your choice of sailing ports. It is, to be sure, rather out of your way to seek a ship at Liverpool unless you expect to gain some particular advantage in doing so. Mr. John Armitage hurried thither in the most breathless haste to catch the King Edward, whereas he might have taken the Touraine at Cherbourg and saved himself a mad scamper, but his satisfaction in finding himself aboard the King Edward was supreme. He was and is, it may be said, a man who salutes the passing days right amiably, no matter how somber their colors.

Shirley Claiborne and Captain Richard Claiborne, her brother, were on deck watching the shipping in the Mersey as the big steamer swung into the channel.

"I hope," observed Dick, "that we have shaken off all your transatlantic suitors. That little Chauvenet died easier than I had expected. He never turned up after we left Florence, but I'm not wholly sure that we shan't find him at the dock in New York. And that mysterious Armitage, who spent so much railway fare following us about and who almost bought you a watch in Geneva, really disappoints me. His persistence had actually compelled my admiration. For a glass blower he was fairly decent, though, and better than a lot of these little toy men with imitation titles."

"Oh, my large brother, I have a confession to make," said Shirley. "Please don't indulge in great oaths or stamp a hole in this sturdy deck, but there are flowers in my stateroom"—

"Probably from the Liverpool consul. He's been pestering father to help him get a transfer to a less gloomy hole."

"Then I shall intercede myself with the president when I get home. They are orchids—from London—but—with Mr. Armitage's card. Wouldn't that excite you?"

"It makes me sick!" and Dick hung heavily on the rail and glared at a passing tug.

"They are beautiful orchids. I don't remember when orchids have happened to me before, Richard—in such quantities. Now, you really didn't disapprove of him so much, did you? This is probably goodby forever, but he wasn't so bad, and he may be an American, after all."

"A common adventurer! Such fellows are always turning up, like bad pennies or a one eyed dog. If I should see him again"—

"Yes, Richard, if you should meet again"—

"I'd ask him to be good enough to stop following us about, and if he persisted I should muss him up."

"Yes; I'm sure you would protect me from his importunities at any hazard," mocked Shirley, turning and leaning against the rail so that she looked along the deck beyond her brother's stalwart shoulders.

"Don't be silly," observed Dick, whose eyes were upon a trim yacht that was steaming slowly beneath them.

"I shan't, but please don't be violent! Do not murder the poor man, Dickie, dear"—and she took hold of his arm entreatingly—"for there he is—as tall and mysterious as ever—and me found guilty with a few of his orchids pinned to my jacket!"

"This is good fortune, indeed," said Armitage a moment later when they had shaken hands. "I finished my errand at Geneva unexpectedly, and here I am."

He smiled at the feebleness of his explanation and joined in their passing comment on the life of the harbor. He was not so dull but that he felt Dick Claiborne's resentment of his presence on board. He knew perfectly well that his acquaintance with the Claibornes was too slight to be severely strained, particularly where a fellow of Dick Claiborne's high spirit was concerned. He talked with them a few minutes longer, then took himself off, and they saw little of him the rest of the day.

Armitage did not share their distinction of a seat at the captain's table, and Dick found him late at night in the smoking saloon with pipe and book. Armitage nodded and asked him to sit down.

"You are a sailor as well as a soldier, captain. You are fortunate. I always sit up the first night to make sure the enemy doesn't lay hold of me in my sleep."

He tossed his book aside, had brandy and soda brought and offered Claiborne a cigar.

"This is not the most fortunate season for crossing. I am sure to fall tomorrow. My father and mother hate the sea particularly and have retired for three days. My sister is the only one of us who is perfectly immune."

Dick Claiborne was a good deal amused at finding himself sitting beside Armitage—enjoying, indeed, his fellow traveler's hospitality, but Armitage, he was forced to admit, bore all the marks of a gentleman. He had, to be sure, followed Shirley about, but even the young man's manner in this was hardly a matter at which he could cavil. And there was something altogether likable in Armitage. His very composure was attractive to Claiborne, and the bold lines of his figure were not wasted on the young officer.

Armitage was thinking rapidly of something he had suddenly resolved to say to Captain Claiborne. He knew that the Claibornes were a family of distinction. The father was an American diplomat and lawyer of wide reputation. The family stood for the best of which America is capable, and they were homeward bound to the American capital, where their social position and the father's fame made them conspicuous.

Armitage put down his cigar and bent toward Claiborne, speaking with quiet directness.

"Captain Claiborne, I was introduced to you at Geneva by Mr. Singleton. You may have observed me several times previously at Venice, Rome, Florence, Paris, Berlin. I certainly saw you. I shall not deny that I intentionally followed you, nor"—John Armitage smiled, then grew grave again—"can I make any adequate apology, for doing so."

"Nor can I make any adequate apology."

Claiborne looked at Armitage wonderingly. The man's attitude and tone were wholly serious and compelled respect. Claiborne nodded and threw away his cigar that he might give his whole attention to what Armitage might have to say.

"A man does not like to have his sister forming the acquaintance of persons who are not properly vouched for. Except for Singleton you know nothing of me, and Singleton knows very little of me indeed."

Claiborne nodded. He felt the color creeping into his cheeks consciously as Armitage touched upon this matter.

"I speak to you as I do because it is your right to know who and what I am, for I am not on the King Edward by accident, but by intention, and I am going to Washington because your sister lives there."

Claiborne smiled in spite of himself.

"But, my dear sir, this is most extraordinary! I don't know that I care to hear any more. By listening I seem to be encouraging you to follow us. It's altogether too unusual. It's almost preposterous."

And Dick Claiborne frowned severely, but Armitage still met his eyes gravely.

"It's only decent for a man to give his references when it's natural for them to be required. I was educated at Trinity college, Toronto. I spent a year at the Harvard law school. And I am not a beggar utterly. I own a ranch in Montana that actually pays and a thousand acres of the best wheat land in Nebraska. At the Bronx Loan and Trust company in New York I have securities to a considerable amount—I am perfectly willing that any one who is at all interested should inquire of the trust company officers as to my standing with them. If I were asked to state my occupation, I should have to say that I am a cattle herder—what you call a cowboy. I can make my living in the practice of the business almost anywhere from New Mexico north to the Canadian line. I flatter myself that I am pretty good at it," and John Armitage smiled and took a cigarette from a box on the table and lighted it.

Dick Claiborne was greatly interested in what Armitage had said, and he struggled between an inclination to encourage further confidence and a feeling that he should, for Shirley's sake, make it clear to this young stranger that it was of no consequence to any member of the Claiborne family who he was or what might be the extent of his lands or the unimpeachable character of his investments. But it was not so easy to turn aside a fellow who was so big of frame and apparently so sane and so steady of purpose as this Armitage. And there was, too, the further consideration that while Armitage was volunteering gratuitous information and assuming an interest in his affairs by the Claibornes that was wholly unjustified, there was also the other side of the matter: that his explanations proceeded from motives of delicacy that were praiseworthy. Dick was puzzled and piqued besides to find that his resources as a big protecting brother were so soon exhausted. What Armitage was asking was the right to seek his sister Shirley's hand in marriage, and the thing was absurd. Moreover, who was John Armitage?

The question startled Claiborne into a realization of the fact that Armitage had volunteered considerable information without at all answering this question. Dick Claiborne was a human being and curious.

"Pardon me," he asked, "but are you an Englishman?"

"I am not," answered Armitage. "I have been so long in America that I feel as much at home there as anywhere—but I am neither English nor American by birth. I am, on the other hand"—

He hesitated for the barest second, and Claiborne was sensible of an intensification of interest. Now at last there was to be a revelation that amounted to something.

"On the other hand," Armitage repeated, "I was born at Fontainebleau, where my parents lived for only a few months, but I do not consider that that fact makes me a Frenchman. My mother is dead. My father died—very recently. I have been in America enough to know that a foreigner is often under suspicion—particularly if he have a title. My distinction is that I am a foreigner without one!" John Armitage laughed.

"It is, indeed, a real merit," declared Dick, who felt something was expected of him. In spite of himself he found much to like in John Armitage. He particularly despised sham and pretense, and he had been won by the evident sincerity of Armitage's wish to appear well in his eyes.

"And now," said Armitage, "I assure you that I am not in the habit of talking so much about myself—and if you will overlook this offense I promise not to bore you again."

"I have been interested," remarked Dick. "And," he added, "I cannot do less than thank you, Mr. Armitage."

Armitage began talking of the American army—its strength and weaknesses—with an intimate knowledge that greatly surprised and interested the young officer, and when they separated presently it was with a curious mixture of liking and mystification that Claiborne reviewed their talk.

The next day brought heavy weather, and only hardened seagoers were abroad. Armitage, breakfasting late, was not satisfied that he had acted wisely in speaking to Captain Claiborne; but he had, at any rate, eased in some degree his own conscience, and he had every intention of seeing all that he could of Shirley Claiborne during these days of their fellow voyaging.

Chapter VII

ON THE DARK DECK.

"I AM Columbus every time I cross," said Shirley. "What lies out there in the west is an undiscovered country."

"Then I shall have to take the part of the rebellious and doubting crew. There is no America, and we're sure to get into trouble if we don't turn back."

"You shall be clapped into irons and fed on bread and water and turned over to the Indians as soon as we reach land."

"Don't starve me! Let me hang from the yardarm at once or walk the plank. I choose the hour immediately after dinner for my obsequies!"

They were silent for a moment, continuing their tramp. Fair weather was peopling the decks. Dick Claiborne was engrossed with a vivacious California girl, and Shirley saw him only at meals, but he and Armitage held night sessions in the smoking room, with increased liking on both sides.

Armitage saw something of all the Claibornes every day in the pleasant intimacy of ship life, and Hilton Claiborne found the young man an interesting talker. Judge Claiborne is, as every one knows, the best posted American of his time in diplomatic history, and when they were together Armitage suggested topics that were well calculated to awaken the old lawyer's interest.

Shirley and Armitage talked—as people will on shipboard—of everything under the sun. Shirley's enthusiasms were in themselves interesting, but she was informed in the world's larger affairs, as became the daughter of a man who was an authority in such matters, and found it pleasant to discuss them with Armitage. He felt the poetic quality in her. It was that which had first appealed to him, but he did not know that something of the same sort in himself touched her. It was enough for those days that he was courteous and amusing and gained a trifle in her eyes from the fact that he had no tangible background.

Then came the evening of the fifth day. They were taking a turn after dinner on the lighted deck. The spring stars hung faint and far through thin clouds, and the wind was keen from the sea. A few passengers were out. The deck stewards went about gathering up rugs and chairs for the night.

"Time oughtn't to be reckoned at all at sea, so that people who feel themselves getting old might sail forth into the deep and defy the old man with the hourglass."

"I like the idea. Such people could become fishers—permanently and grow very wise from so much brain food."

"They wouldn't eat, Mr. Armitage. Brain food forsooth! You talk like a breakfast food advertisement. My idea—mine, please note—is for such fortunate people to sail in pretty little boats with orange tinted sails and pick up lost dreams. I got a hint of that in a pretty poem once—

"Time seemed to pause a little space.
I heard a dream go by."

"But out here in midocean a little boat with lateen sails wouldn't have much show. And dreams passing over—the idea is pretty and is creditable to your imagination. But I thought your fancy was more militant. Now, for example, you like battle pictures," he said. "That was a wonderful collection of military and battle pictures shown in Paris last winter."

She half withdrew her hand from his arm and turned away. The sea winds did not wholly account for the sudden color in her cheeks. She had seen Armitage in Paris—in cafes, at the opera, but not at the great exhibition of the world famous battle pictures, yet undoubtedly he had seen her, and she remembered with instant consciousness the hours of absorption she had spent before those canvases.

"I was in Paris during the exhibition," he said quietly. "Ormsby, the American painter—the man who did the 'High Tide at Gettysburg'—is an acquaintance of mine."

"Oh!"

It was Ormsby's painting that had particularly captivated Shirley. She had returned to it day after day, and the thought that Armitage had taken advantage of her deep interest in Pickett's charging gray line was annoying, and she abruptly changed the subject.

Shirley had speculated much as to the meaning of Armitage's remark at the carriage door in Geneva—that he expected the slayer of the old Austrian prime minister to pass that way. Armitage had not referred to the crime in any way in his talks with her on the King Edward. Their conversations had been pitched usually in a light and frivolous key, or, if one were disposed to be serious, the other responded in a note of levity.

They watched the lights of an eastbound steamer that was passing near. The exchange of rocket signals—that pretty and graceful parley between ships that pass in the night—interested them for a moment. Then the deck lights went out so suddenly it seemed that a dark curtain had descended and shut them in with the sea.

"Accident to the dynamo—we shall have the lights on in a moment!" shouted the deck officer, who stood near, talking to a passenger.

"Shall we go in?" asked Armitage.

"Yes; it is getting cold," replied Shirley.

For a moment they were quite alone on the dark deck, though they heard voices near at hand.

They were groping their way toward the main saloon, where they had left Mr. and Mrs. Claiborne, when Shirley was aware of some one lurking near. A figure seemed to be crouching close by, and she felt its furtive movements and knew that it had passed, but remained a few feet away. Her hand on Armitage's arm tightened.

"What is that? There is some one following us," she said.

At the same moment Armitage, too, became aware of the presence of a stooping figure behind him. He stopped abruptly and faced about.

"Stand quite still, Miss Claiborne."

He peered about, and instantly, as though waiting for his voice, a tall figure rose not a yard from him and a long arm shot high above his head and descended swiftly. They were close to the rail, and a roll of the ship sent Armitage off his feet and away from his assailant. Shirley at the same moment threw out her hands, defensively or for support, and clutched the arm and shoulder of the man who had assailed Armitage. He had driven a knife at John Armitage and was poising himself for another attempt when Shirley seized his arm. As he drew back a fold of his cloak still lay in Shirley's grasp, and she gave a sharp little cry as the figure, with a quick jerk, released the cloak and slipped away into the shadows. A moment later the lights were restored, and she saw Armitage regarding ruefully a long slit in the left arm of his ulster.

"Are you hurt? What has happened?" she demanded.

"It must have been a sea serpent," he replied, laughing.

The deck officer regarded them curiously as they blinked in the glare of

A long arm shot high above his head and descended swiftly.

light and asked whether anything was wrong. Armitage turned the matter off.

"I guess it was a sea serpent," he said. "It bit a hole in my ulster, for which I am not grateful." Then in a lower tone to Shirley: "That was certainly a strange proceeding. I am sorry you were startled, and I am under greatest obligations to you, Miss Claiborne. Why, you actually pulled the fellow away!"

"Oh, no," she returned lightly, but still breathing hard; "it was the instinct of self preservation. I was unsteady on my feet for a moment and sought something to take hold of. That pirate was the nearest thing, and I caught hold of his cloak. I'm sure it was a cloak, and that makes me sure he was a human villain of some sort. He didn't feel in the least like a sea serpent. But some one tried to injure you—it is no jesting matter"—

"Some lunatic escaped from the steerage probably. I shall report it to the officers."

"Yes; it should be reported," said Shirley.

"It was very strange. Why, the deck of the King Edward is the safest place in the world, but it's something to have had hold of a sea serpent or a pirate! I hope you will forgive me for bringing you into such an encounter, but if you hadn't caught his cloak"—

Armitage was uncomfortable and anxious to allay her fears. The incident was by no means trivial, as he knew. Passengers on the great transatlantic steamers are safeguarded by every possible means, and the fact that he had been attacked in the few minutes that the deck lights had been out of order pointed to an espionage that was both close and daring. He was greatly surprised and more shaken than he wished Shirley to believe. The thing was disquieting enough, and it could not but impress her strangely that he, of all the persons on board, should have been the object of so unusual an assault. He was in the disagreeable plight of having subjected her to danger, and as they entered the brilliant saloon he freed himself of the ulster with its telltale gash and sought to minimize her impression of the incident.

Shirley did not refer to the matter again, but resolved to keep her own counsel. She felt that any one who would accept the one chance in a thousand of striking down an enemy on a steamer deck must be animated by very bitter hatred. She knew that to speak of the affair to her father or brother would be to alarm them and prejudice them against John Armitage, about whom her brother at least had entertained doubts. And it is not reassuring as to a man of whom little or nothing is known that he is menaced by secret enemies.

He scrutinized every name on the passenger list.

The attack had found Armitage unprepared and off guard, but with swift reaction his wits were at work. He at once sought the purser and scrutinized every name on the passenger list. It was unlikely that a steerage passenger could reach the saloon deck unobserved. A second cabin passenger might do so, however, and he sought among the names in the second cabin list for a clew. He did not believe that Chauvenet or Durand had boarded the King Edward. He himself had made the boat only by a quick dash, and he had left those two gentlemen at Geneva with much to consider.

It was, however, quite within the probabilities that they would send some one to watch him, for the two men whom he had overheard in the dark house on the Boulevard Froissart were active and resourceful rascals, he had no doubt. Whether they would be able to make anything of the cigarette case he had stupidly left behind he could not conjecture, but the importance of recovering the packet he had cut from Chauvenet's coat was not a trifle that rogues of their caliber would ignore. There was, the purser said, a sick man in the second cabin, who had kept close to his berth. The steward believed the man to be a continental of some sort, who spoke bad German. He had taken the boat at Liverpool, paid for his passage in gold, and, complaining of illness, retired, evidently for the voyage. His name was Peter Ludovic, and the steward described him in detail.

"Big fellow, bullet head, bristling mustache, small eyes"—

"That will do," said Armitage, grinning at the ease with which he identified the man.

"You understand that it is wholly irregular for us to let such a matter pass without acting," said the purser.

"It would serve no purpose and might do harm. I will take the responsibility."

And John Armitage made a memorandum in his notebook:

"Zmal ——; travels as Peter Ludovic."

Armitage carried the envelope which he had cut from Chauvenet's coat pinned into an inner pocket of his waistcoat, and since boarding the King Edward he had examined it twice daily to see that it was intact. The three red wax seals were in blank, replacing those of like size that had originally been affixed to the envelope, and at once after the attack on the dark deck he opened the packet and examined the papers, some half dozen sheets of thin linen written in a clerk's clear hand in black ink. There had been no mistake in the matter. The packet which Chauvenet had purloined from the old prime minister at Vienna had come again into Armitage's hands. He was daily tempted to destroy it and cast it in bits to the sea winds, but he was deterred by the remembrance of his last interview with the old prime minister.

"Do something for Austria—something for the empire." These phrases repeated themselves over and over again in his mind until they rose and fell with the cadence of the high, wavering voice of the cardinal archbishop of Vienna as he chanted the mass of requiem for Count Ferdinand von Stroebel.

Chapter VIII

"THE KING IS DEAD; LONG LIVE THE KING!"

JOHN ARMITAGE lingered in New York for a week, not to press the Claibornes too closely, then went to Washington. He wrote himself down on the register of the New American as John Armitage, Cinch Tight, Mont., and took a suit of rooms high up, with an outlook that swept Pennsylvania avenue.

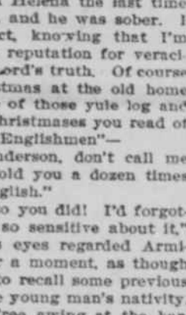
It was on the evening of a bright April day that he thus established himself, and after he had unpacked his belongings he stood long at the window and watched the lights leap out of the dusk over the city. He was in Washington because Shirley Claiborne lived there, and he knew that even if he wished to do so he could no longer throw an air of inadvertence into his meetings with her. He had been very lonely in those days when he first saw her abroad. The sight of her had lifted his mood of depression, and now, after those enchanted hours at sea, his coming to Washington had been inevitable.

Many things passed through his mind as he stood at the open window. His life, he felt, could never be again as it had been before, and he sighed deeply as he recalled his talk with the old prime minister at Geneva. Then he laughed quietly as he remembered Chauvenet and Durand and the dark house on the Boulevard Froissart, but the further recollection of the attack made on his life on the deck of the King Edward sobered him, and he turned away from the window impatiently. He had seen the sick second cabin passenger leave the steamer at New York, but had taken no trouble either to watch or to avoid him. Very likely the man was under instructions and had been told to follow the Claibornes home, and the thought of their identification with himself by his enemies angered him. Chauvenet was likely to appear in Washington at any time and would undoubtedly seek the Claibornes at once. The fact that the man was a scoundrel might in some circumstances have afforded Armitage comfort, but here again Armitage's mood grew dark. Jules Chauvenet was undoubtedly a rascal of a shrewd and dangerous type, but who, pray, was John Armitage?

The bell in his entry rang, and he flashed on the lights and opened the door.

"Well, I like this, setting yourself up here in gloomy splendor and never saying a word. You never deserved to have any friends, John Armitage!"

"Jim Sanderson, come in!" Armitage grasped the hands of a red bearded giant of forty, the possessor of alert brown eyes and a big voice.



Senator Sanderson.

"It's my rural habit of reading the register every night in search of constituents that brings me here. They said they guessed you were in, so I just came up to see whether you were opening a poker game or had come to sneak a claim past the watchdog of the treasury."

The caller threw himself into a chair and rolled a fat, unlighted cigar about in his mouth. "You're a peach, all right, and as offensively hale and handsome as ever. When are you going to the ranch?"

"Well, not just immediately. I want to sample the fleshpots for a day or two."

"You're getting soft; that's what the matter with you. You're afraid of the spring zephyrs on the Montana range. Well, I'll admit that it's rather more diverting here."

"There is no debating that, senator. How do you like being a statesman? It was so sudden and all that. I read an awful roast of you in an English paper. They took your election to the senate as another evidence of the complete domination of our politics by the plutocrats."

Sanderson winked prodigiously.

"The papers have rather skinned me; but, on the whole, I'll do very well. They say it isn't respectable to be a senator these days, but they oughtn't to hold it up against a man that he's rich. If the Lord put silver in the mountains of Montana and let me dig it out, it's nothing against me, is it?"

"Decidedly not! And if you want to invest it in a senatorship it's the Lord's hand again."

"Why, sure!" And the senator from Montana winked once more. "But it's expensive. I've got to be elected again next winter—I'm only filling out Billings' term—and I'm not sure I can go up against it."

"But you are nothing if not unselfish. If the good of the country demands it you'll not falter, if I know you."

"There's hot water heat in this hotel, so please turn off the hot air. I saw your foreman in Helena the last time I was out there, and he was sober. I mention the fact, knowing that I'm jeopardizing my reputation for veracity, but it's the Lord's truth. Of course you spent Christmas at the old home in England—one of those yule log and plum pudding Christmases you read of in novels. You Englishmen"—

"My dear Sanderson, don't call me English! I've told you a dozen times that I'm not English."

"So you did, so you did! I'd forgotten that you're so sensitive about it," and Sanderson's eyes regarded Armitage intently for a moment, as though he were trying to recall some previous discussion of the young man's nativity.

"I offer you free swing at the bar, senator. May I summon a Montana cocktail? You taught me the ingredients once—three dashes orange bitters, two dashes acid phosphate, half a jigger of whisky and half a jigger of Italian vermuth. You undermined the constitutions of half Montana with that mess."

Sanderson reached for his hat with sudden dejection.

"The sprinkling cart for me! I've got a nerve specialist engaged by the year to keep me out of sanitariums. See here, I want you to go with us tonight to the secretary of state's push. Not many of the Montana boys get this far from home, and I want you for exhibition purposes. Say, John, when I saw "Cinch Tight, Montana," written on the register down there it increased my circulation seven beats! You're all right, and I guess you're about as good an American as they make—anywhere—John Armitage!"

The function for which the senator from Montana provided an invitation for Armitage was a large affair in honor of several new ambassadors. At 10 o'clock Senator Sanderson was introducing Armitage right and left as one of his representative constituents. Armitage and he owned adjoining ranches in Montana, and Sanderson called upon his neighbor to stand up boldly for their state before the minions of effete monarchies.

Mrs. Sanderson had asked Armitage to return to her for a little Montana talk, as she put it, after the first rush of their entrance was over, and as he waited in the drawing room for an opportunity of speaking to her he chatted with Franzel, an attache of the Austrian embassy, to whom Sanderson had introduced him. Franzel was a gloomy young man with a monocle, and he was waiting for a particular girl, who happened to be the daughter of the Spanish ambassador. And, this being his object, he had chosen his position with care, near the door of the drawing room, and Armitage shared for the moment the advantage that lay in the Austrian's point of view. Armitage had half expected that the Claibornes would be present at a function as comprehensive of the higher official world as this, and he intended asking Mrs. Sanderson if she knew them as soon as opportunity offered. The Austrian attache proved tiresome, and Armitage was about to drop him, when suddenly he caught sight of Shirley Claiborne at the far end of the broad hall. Her head was turned partly toward him. He saw her for an instant through the throng. Then his eyes fell upon Chauvenet at her side, talking with liveliest animation. He was not more than her own height, and his profile presented the clean, sharp effect of a cameo. The vivid outline of his dark face held Armitage's eyes. Then as Shirley passed on through an opening in the crowd her escort turned, holding the way open for her, and Armitage met the man's gaze.

It was with an accented gravity that Armitage nodded his head to some declaration of the melancholy attache at this moment. He had known when he left Geneva that he had not done with Jules Chauvenet, but the man's prompt appearance surprised Armitage. He ran over the names of the steamers by which Chauvenet might easily have sailed from either a German or a French port and reached Washington quite as soon as himself. Chauvenet was in Washington, at any rate, and not only there, but socially accepted and in the good graces of Shirley Claiborne.

The somber attache was speaking of the Japanese.

"They must be crushed—crushed," said Franzel. The two had been conversing in French.

"Yes, he must be crushed," returned Armitage absentmindedly, in English; then, remembering himself, he repeated the affirmation in French, changing the pronoun.

Mrs. Sanderson was now free. She was a pretty, vivacious woman, much younger than her stalwart husband—a college graduate whom he had found teaching school near one of his silver mines.

"Welcome once more, constituent! We're proud to see you, I can tell you. Our host owns some marvelous tapestries, and they're hung out tonight for the world to see." She guided Armitage toward the secretary's gallery on an upper floor. Their host was almost as famous as a connoisseur as for his achievements in diplomacy, and the gallery was a large apartment in which every article of furniture, as well as the paintings, tapestries and specimens of pottery, was the careful choice of a thoroughly cultivated taste.

"It isn't merely an art gallery. It's the most beautiful room in America," murmured Mrs. Sanderson.

"I can well believe it. There's my favorite Vibert—I wondered what had become of it."

"It isn't surprising that the secretary is making a great reputation by his dealings with foreign powers. It's a poor ambassador who could not be persuaded after an hour in this splendid room. The ordinary affairs of life should not be mentioned here. A king's coronation would not be out of place—in fact, there's a chair in the corner against that Gobelin that would serve the situation. The old gentleman by that cabinet is the Baron von Marhof, the ambassador from Austria-Hungary. He's a brother-in-law of Count von Stroebel, who was murdered so horribly in a railway carriage a few weeks ago."

"Ah, to be sure! I haven't seen the baron in years. He has changed little."

"Then you knew him—in the old country?"

"Yes; I used to see him—when I was a boy," remarked Armitage.

Mrs. Sanderson glanced at Armitage sharply. She had dined at his ranch house in Montana and knew that he lived like a gentleman; that his house, its appointments and service were unusual for a western ranchman. And she recalled, too, that she and her husband had often speculated as to Armitage's antecedents and history without arriving at any conclusion in regard to him.

The room had slowly filled, and they strolled about, dividing attention between distinguished personages and the not less celebrated works of art.

"Oh, by the way, Mr. Armitage, there's the girl I have chosen for you to marry. I suppose it would be just as well for you to meet her now, though that dark little foreigner seems to be monopolizing her."

"I am wholly agreeable," laughed Armitage. "The sooner the better and be done with it."

"Don't be so frivolous. There, you can look safely now. She's stopped to speak to that bald and pink justice of the supreme court—the girl with the brown eyes and hair. Have a care!"

Shirley and Chauvenet left the venerable justice, and Mrs. Sanderson intercepted them at once.

"To think of all these beautiful things in our own America!" exclaimed Shirley. "And you, Mr. Armitage"—

"Among the other curios, Miss Claiborne," laughed John, taking her hand.

"But I haven't introduced you yet," began Mrs. Sanderson, puzzled.

"No; the King Edward did that. We crossed together. Oh, M. Chauvenet, let me present Mr. Armitage," said Shirley, seeing that the men had not spoken.

The situation amused Armitage, and he smiled rather more broadly than was necessary in expressing his pleasure at meeting M. Chauvenet. They regarded each other with the swift intentness of men who are used to the sharp exercise of their eyes, and when Armitage turned toward Shirley and Mrs. Sanderson he was aware that Chauvenet continued to regard him with fixed gaze.

"Miss Claiborne is a wonderful sailor. The Atlantic is a little tumultuous at times in the spring, but she reported to the captain every day."

"Miss Claiborne is nothing if not extraordinary," reclared Mrs. Sanderson with frank admiration.

"The word seems to have been coined for her," said Chauvenet, his white teeth showing under his thin black mustache.

"And still leaves the language distinguished chiefly for its poverty," added Armitage, and the men bowed to Shirley and then to Mrs. Sanderson and again to each other. It was like a rehearsal of some trifle in a comedy.

"How charming!" laughed Mrs. Sanderson. "And this lovely room is just the place for it."

They were still talking together as Franzel, with whom Armitage had spoken below, entered hurriedly. He held a crumpled note, whose contents it seemed had shaken him out of his habitual melancholy composure.

"Is Baron von Marhof in the room?" he asked of Armitage, fumbling nervously at his monocle.

The Austrian ambassador, with several ladies and led by Senator Sanderson, was approaching.

The attache hurried to his chief and addressed him in a low tone. The am-